From The Handmaid's Tale to Bumped: Dystopian Fiction and American Women's Reproductive Rights

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This paper examines select literary interpretations and reviews of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and compares Atwood's motivation and purpose for her work to later works, including Megan McCafferty's goals in writing *Bumped.* The content of each work is impacted by the author's perspective on political and women's issues making news at the time their books were published. The relevance of the central themes discussed in both works continues in spite of three decades of history that have elapsed between their publications. My argument is that McCafferty's work, which is aimed at a young adult audience, revises and updates Atwood's novel in ways that position its political message to have relevance for a generation of young women who consider themselves "post-feminist" and regard *The Handmaid's Tale* as an outdated cautionary tale belonging in a distant past.

The Issues

Reproductive freedom (or lack thereof) for women is a topic that has been well represented in science fiction. The future societies depicted in these books over the years have served to horrify, infuriate, and elicit debate from their respective readerships. Are these stories a call to action? Is the proverbial 'slap in the face' generated by these works necessary before the North American audience will pay attention to the issues raised? It could be argued that, given recent events (those documented at the time of *Roe v. Wade* in the early 1970s to the present) related to the stifling of women's right to have (or not to have) children and retain autonomy

over their own bodies, the often shocking situations and environments presented in these texts appear to serve as ominous predictors of future events. In fact, though, these authors' warnings have seemingly gone unheeded and their views have been written off as extremist, while the combination of current legislature and public apathy work to undermine women's freedom of choice and their right to physical autonomy.

In "What does science fiction tell us about the future of reproductive rights?", appearing in a February 22, 2012, web post for the *IO9 Backgrounder*, Annalee Newitz calls attention to the pervasive theme involving reproductive methods/rights in the popular genre:

> If everything from technology to politics will be different in the future, then so will human reproduction. That's why so much science fiction deals with the question of how humans make babies – or don't make them – in alternate worlds that are often quite close to our own. It's also why reproduction is a political issue. After all, a political campaign represents the promise of a new kind of future. (Newitz).

Newitz highlights several interesting incarnations of radical reproduction processes described in science fiction works penned within the last hundred years, and indeed, the theme of controlling human reproduction runs through a wide range of otherwise dissimilar works. In addition to *The Handmaid's Tale* in which reproduction is controlled by the state, a government that oversees the breeding of humans to fulfill certain tasks of society rules in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and in the movie *Gattaca* – although there are characters present in both stories whose genes are not manipulated, and who question the motives of their respective regimes. Why is the manner in which reproduction takes place such a central theme in these speculative works?

Aside from illustrating different ways in which reproduction can be reduced to a perverse and dehumanizing process for human beings in these fictional future societies, these texts are commentaries on current regimes and contexts within society today that hint at subtle changes that can occur over time if no action is taken and, when considering the cumulative effect of these subtle changes, the reader can easily envision a world in which these atrocities become reality. Why are such themes so prevalent in popular Young Adult novels today? Certainly Atwood's book, at least at the time of its publication, was not considered YA fiction; yet, it is now regularly used and taught in literature classes at the high school level. Young Adult novels that include elements of reproductive restriction for women are best sellers (*Bumped*, the *Eve* series, the *Birthmarked* series, among many others) which means that this age group is buying them not only for class study, but for their own recreational reading. What is it about restrictive reproduction themes that appeal to this particular readership? What can be assumed about the concerns of these readers?

As McCafferty has suggested, pervasive media certainly plays a role in shaping young adults' perceptions. How does the "instant connectivity/interaction" –based character of multimedia impact readers' views of their personal reproductive rights? Does it spur them to consider their own situations further, lead them to educate themselves about contemporary legislation, or contemplate what any restriction with respect to their own decisions about their bodies means for them right now as well as later in life? McCafferty, in spite of the fact that her novel is a traditional book, seemingly exploits the relationship between present day media and young adult consumers; the instant connectivity made possible by the media serves to both promote an author's work as well as influence and inform young women's level of political activism in ways that were not possible at the time of Atwood's publication. In a society where

media-informed values saturate the daily lives of women, are the decisions that women make giving them a true voice? Or does the media presence *become* their voice?

Plot Synopses

The setting for *The Handmaid's Tale* is Cambridge, Massachusetts, home to Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, only the schools there are closed, as are most of the businesses that once flourished in the prominent college town. In this near-future society, one in which a constant state of war with undisclosed enemies pervades the propaganda-laden airwaves, education is no longer a priority – at least not for the women who live there.

Some unnamed biological catastrophe, perhaps a nuclear disaster based on the references to toxic waste given in the text, has rendered most of the population sterile. Women who are capable of conceiving children are now prized above any other commodity; as a result, once they are identified, they are stripped of their jobs, money, families, and their identities before being summarily kidnapped and brought to a facility where they are held prisoner. The purpose of their incarceration is to be trained as handmaids – surrogates whose only function is to carry a child for a wealthy, barren couple. Their indoctrination by the Aunts – women in power whose repertoire includes torture among other methods to achieve their goals – is tantamount to brainwashing.

A new government has seized control, one in which a few powerful men, the Commanders, regulate all matters of state and society. Their regime, based on extremist interpretations of the Bible, flourishes through rationalization and demoralization of its people. The idea of the handmaid being a surrogate is taken as literal translation from the Old Testament story of Sarah, the barren wife of Abraham, who gives her husband permission to sleep with her

handmaid Hagar in order to conceive a child. Aside from the monthly ceremony involving forced copulation with the Commander in the presence of his wife, the life of a handmaid is unremarkable and empty. Kept in near isolation, they are marked in public spaces by their unique red clothing, an updated version of Hester Prynne's scarlet letter that testifies to their primary identification as sexual objects.

The story is the personal narrative of Offred ("Of Fred," the Commander to whom she is assigned as a surrogate), the main character who remembers her life before the transition, and longs to return to that time. Forbidden to read or write, the weight of her isolation bearing down upon her, Offred learns to cope and ultimately takes a chance at escape. The reader is left with an ambiguous ending that may or may not equate to Offred's freedom.

McCafferty's *Bumped* is set in the year 2036. In a situation similar to that defining Atwood's dystopia, a virus has left the adults in society – those over 18 – unable to have children. Wealthy couples incapable of bearing children pay exorbitant sums of money to young girls who are willing to become pregnant and give up their babies. Those girls who possess qualities that are seen to indicate genetic superiority land the best contracts – often including cars and college tuition. In a sense, the virus in *Bumped* can be seen as a commentary on the delayed parenthood – and the concomitant rise in fertility specialists, egg-freezing, surrogacy, etc. – that often characterizes an entire demographic of high-achieving, middle-class women. In fact, a pointed reading suggests the book supports a more reactionary view of women's rights in the sense that it suggests that no female can both grow to maturity and have a career *and* give birth to/raise a child of her own.

While the government is not portrayed as a totalitarian organization, its political agenda is to encourage teenage girls to have sex and become pregnant as often as they can, under the guise of patriotism. Government advertisements perpetuate the notion that sex with strangers benefits the state; obtaining and fulfilling as many "birth contracts" as possible before turning eighteen is crucial to building a better nation. Condoms are outlawed. The use of mood-altering drugs to reduce inhibitions about sex is standard protocol; in fact, they are frequently doled out at teen parties like candy. Pills that contain supplements believed to increase girls' maternal instincts, school cafeteria food loaded with folic acid – these are part of a normal and customary regime aimed at increasing the fertility of these young females at all costs. Retailers cater to pregnant teens by playing popular music with "preggie" inspired lyrics; their ample-sized clothing lines are directed toward "fertilicious" females.

Status, designated by pregnancy and the quality of contracts, creates distinct lines between the "haves" and the "have nots" – both in terms of money and in desirable genetics. Girls are pitted against each other as they vie for contracts; both boys and girls who represent what is perceived as the low end of the gene pool are marginalized. Pressure is applied to these teenagers not only by peers but by demanding parents who want the best for their adopted offspring. Between the angst of obtaining the perfect "bump" partner and the physical and emotional stress inherent in multiple contract involvement, the complications that can occur during childbirth, among other dangers, are downplayed. In fact, the absence of one of the protagonist's classmates who experienced physical complications during childbirth is never fully explained. The circumstances leading to the girl's truancy are essentially glossed over in an attempt to hide the truth from the rest of the students.

Melody and Harmony are sixteen-year-old twins who have been separated at birth, raised in different cultures, and are now bound by different covenants concerning pregnancy. Melody lives a secular life in Otherside, and has entered into a lucrative contract to "bump" with a "genetically flawless" male. Harmony is a wife in an arranged marriage that takes place in Goodside, a remote village focused on devout religious practices, where females are equally pressured to have children. Instead of giving their babies up for adoption after they are born, the girls of Goodside keep their infants and raise them with their appointed spouses. In the following excerpt, Melody highlights the role of capitalism in her philosophy (and the philosophy of many of her peers) about entering into birth contracts:

> "A free society cannot force girls to have children, but a free market can richly reward those who do'" (Ashley and Tyler Mayflower, PhDs, Princeton U, characters from *Bumped*). Ash and Ty are – or were – Wall Streeters turned economics professors at the University who were way ahead of reproductive trends. They predicted sixteen years ago almost before anyone else, that girls like me – prettier, smarter, healthier – would be the world's most valuable resource. And like any rare commodity in an unregulated marketplace, prices for our services would skyrocket. It wasn't about money, really, not at first. It was about status. Who had it, and who didn't. And my parents did everything in their power to make sure I had it. (McCafferty 39)

As McCafferty suggests, it is because of their genetic or situational circumstances that certain individuals in *Bumped* are more valuable and thus command higher "contract rates" than others, instantly creating a marginalized sector of society that has essentially no hope whatsoever for reproduction. If individuals do not possess the desired physical, academic, or financial characteristics for "Bumped" contracts, they do not have opportunities for having children that fit

within the mainstream order of reproducing "for the benefit of the country." It is interesting to note that in the television programming McCafferty credits for at least a portion of her inspiration for *Bumped*, those teens who are glamorized for being pregnant and given their fifteen minutes of fame are, in general, white middle-class females. Given that this type of programming appears to have a pronounced following within this particular demographic, the question about the role race and socioeconomic status plays in these perceptions is worth consideration.

With respect to class and marginalized portions of the population, another text should be mentioned within the context of the discussion dealing with women's reproductive roles and the caste systems that are inadvertently (or perhaps purposefully?) created when a female makes an independent decision about children and/or her own body.

In Hillary Jordan's *When She Woke*, the protagonist awakens to find that she has been genetically altered so that her skin color is red – punishment for having had an abortion. In this future society, instead of prisons for housing those who have committed crimes, each criminal is genetically color-coded to represent the seriousness of their respective crimes, i.e. yellow for misdemeanors, blue for intermediate criminal activity, and red being considered the most egregious of transgressions which include abortion and murder. It is in this *Scarlet Letter*-esque environment that the reader learns just how averse the society is in this novel to any reproductive decisions the mother may make that do not happen to include carrying a child to full term. The open way in which everyone can identify convicted criminals in this context speaks to some of the same concerns we see in present day society with individuals' treatment of visually pregnant females. Today, the idea of forcing the censorship of certain behaviors on pregnant females, such as drinking alcohol or eating tuna fish, suggests society's alleged right to the progeny as

"community property" and demonstrates a vested interest in the fetus' care and viability without regard for the wishes and rights of the mother-to-be.

Context

In 1984 when Margaret Atwood wrote *The Handmaid's Tale*, reproductive rights were a central concern in both the social and political environments of the time. In the U.S., Ronald Reagan had been re-elected president, and concerns regarding religious freedoms and women's rights were expanding at an exponential rate. The feminist movement in 1984 was a robust enough presence to be under attack. This period found organized opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment, often including female conservative extremists who served to widen the political gap between American women:

> Arguments by ERA opponents such as Phyllis Schlafly, right-wing leader of the Eagle Forum/STOP ERA, played on the same fears that had generated female opposition to woman suffrage. Anti-ERA organizers claimed that the ERA would deny woman's right to be supported by her husband, privacy rights would be overturned, women would be sent into combat, and abortion rights and homosexual marriages would be upheld. Opponents surfaced from other traditional sectors as well. States'-rights advocates said the ERA was a federal power grab, and business interests such as the insurance industry opposed a measure they believed would cost them money. Opposition to the ERA was also organized by fundamentalist religious groups. (Francis)

This was also an historic year in terms of the U.S. presidential campaign because Geraldine Ferraro was chosen as Democrat Walter Mondale's running mate – the first Italian American and the first female to run in a major national election. In spite of Ferraro's initial

popularity, the vast majority of women voted for Reagan. Her endorsement of abortion rights, in spite of being Catholic, would place American women at odds with each other (Martin, NYT A1).

Danita J. Dodson conducted an interview with Margaret Atwood in 1997, eleven years after *The Handmaid's Tale* was published in the U.S. In response to Dodson's questions, Atwood describes real world issues that correlate with the theme of women controlling women (as seen in the relationship between Phyllis Schlafly and the ERA) in her book:

> In order to understand the hierarchy of women in The Handmaid's Tale, you should look at how the British took control of India. They raised the power of control amongst the Indians themselves. In Gilead control comes amongst the women themselves. That's my model of control. Also look at the Soviet Union under Stalin. Look at world history in general. (Dodson)

In an on-line interview with Random House, Atwood compares the religious extremism seen in Gilead to the Puritans:

> [It] …is a throwback to the early Puritans whom I studied extensively at Harvard. […] The early Puritans came to America not for religious freedom, as we were taught in school, but to set up a society that would be a theocracy (like Iran) ruled by religious leaders, and monolithic, that is, a society that would not tolerate dissent within itself. … The Puritans … went to the United States and promptly began persecuting anyone who wasn't a Puritan. (Atwood Random House Interview)

Later in the same interview, Atwood voices concern about current religious fanaticism and how it is capable of generating mass support for ideas based on a few individuals' interpretations of the Bible:

> If you were going to take over the United States, how would you do it? 'I have the word from God and this is the way we should run things.' That probably would have more of a chance of working, and in fact there are a number of movements in the States saying just that, and getting lots of dollars and influence. (Atwood, Random House interview)

Atwood also addresses the contemporary issue of infertility and perpetuating the human species under extreme cases of low birthrates, as it pertains to her book:

> In a society in which the birthrate plummets below replacement, the body of people will be forced to determine whether or not it will simply slide gently into oblivion and vanish from the face of the earth. […] What does a society do at this point? Either it accepts the situation or it puts into existence conditions that will increase the number of births. (Atwood, Random House Interview)

This interest in increasing the number of births prevails in the world of Megan McCafferty's *Bumped*. Capitalism is the key to increasing the population through birth contracts involving teens – the only fertile population remaining in this near-future society. True pressure exists for these teenagers whose responsibilities include repopulating the country; albeit, pressure that differs from that experienced by the women of Gilead. Peer, parent, and self-induced pressure to conform are just as effective in controlling women's reproductive choices as is a totalitarian government entity.

Many topics of concern related to women's reproductive freedoms continue to be debated today. In the last three to four years, multiple pieces of legislation were proposed that deal specifically with teenage pregnancy, sex abuse and sex education in public schools. For example, S.1437 – The Communities of Color Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Act of 2011 – proposes "grants [be] awarded for programs to provide youth in racial or ethnic minority or immigrant

communities the information and skills needed to avoid teen pregnancy and develop healthy relationships" and also requires "grants for multimedia campaigns to provide public education and increase public awareness regarding teenage pregnancy and related social and emotional issues" (Congress.gov). Support for such legislation may derive, at least in part, from the perceived impact on adolescents of popular media depictions of teen pregnancy. McCafferty cites the way in which the media glamorizes adolescent pregnancy, especially for teens already in the spotlight, as her inspiration for writing *Bumped*:

> As far as the inspiration goes, Jamie Lyn Spears was my very unlikely muse. When Brittany Spears' kid sister announced that she was pregnant at sixteen, the media went crazy. Meanwhile, *Juno* [2007 film starring Ellen Page as a teenager who carries an accidental pregnancy to term, allowing a middle class couple to adopt the baby] came out right around the same time and it brought debates - such as pro-life versus pro-choice, abstinence only versus condoms in the vending machines – to a whole new level. So I was really fascinated by the media's response, or rather the media's creation of this so called "teen mom phenom." And so it sparked a question in my mind. I asked myself, 'Well, what would happen if girls were encouraged to have sex and encouraged to get pregnant?' and that's the central premise behind Bumped. (McCafferty video).

Issues concerning women's fertility rights and freedoms are just as volatile and global – perhaps even more so now – as they were when readers first turned the pages of *The Handmaid's Tale*. Significant literature has been generated about Atwood's book and how it relates to women's issues; however, this study focuses on whether the depiction of such extreme societies in speculative fiction is necessary in order to call attention to issues that are otherwise invisible because of their slow and incremental procession. The responses that Andrew H. Malcolm

received from Atwood in an interview published in the *New York Times* on April 14, 1990, suggest that may be an accurate assessment:

> "People were saying things like, 'A woman's place is in the home.' And I got to thinking, well, how would someone enforce thoughts like that?" She is convinced that such enforcement would not come through grand pronouncements. "The banality of evil is overwhelming," she said. People who do these kinds of things don't walk down the street frothing at the mouth and looking like Quasimodo. They don't announce, 'We're setting up concentration camps for people we don't like.' They perhaps help create chaos and then wait for society to plead for authoritarianism to help clean up the mess." (Malcolm)

It can be surmised that the readership to which Atwood's work was directed at the time of its publication in the U.S. in 1986, was the adult female population – wives, working mothers, professionals – many of whom were likely to have been well above the legal voting age and familiar with the problems women faced on a daily basis. After a tumultuous run through Congressional hearings during the late 1970s, the ERA had been removed from the Republican platform in 1980 just ahead of Ronald Reagan's election. Ultimately the bill failed because it did not receive ratification from the requisite number of states for passage (Francis). In addition, the "Moral Majority" movement, headed by evangelical fanatic Jerry Farwell, gained momentum as Reagan took office. The legalization of abortion in the 1970s "stoked the movement's grassroots activism … [and] … other related issues such as women's liberation, the gay rights movement, the sexual revolution, secularism in schools, and fears of social disintegration also provided fodder for evangelical and fundamentalist Christians" (Banwart 133). No doubt that Atwood's

readership would have had a shared sense of recent history, regardless of their specific political affiliations or views.

In contrast, McCafferty's book was published specifically for the Young Adult market in 2011. Teenagers are understandably more inclined to read fiction about other teens; therefore, the aim of *Bumped* may have been (and continues to be) to reach those young readers who perhaps are not as familiar with the history of women's rights in the U.S. as their parents were as adults in the 1980s. Young women today consider themselves "post-feminist" if not actively "anti-feminist" as a result of the successful campaign by the right to demonize the term in the past couple of decades. For example, Sophie Thomas, an eighth-grader at Clermont Northeastern Middle School in Ohio, wore a tee shirt with the word "feminist" printed on the front this past March on the day her class picture was taken. A school administrator later had the photograph altered so that the word was removed from the student's shirt in the version of the image that was ultimately circulated at school. Thomas stated she was upset when she discovered the issue with the class photo, so she went to the school principal who told her that the image was altered because the term "feminist" is "offensive to some people" (Blildner). This example illustrates the marked difference in readership mindset with respect to feminist ideology.

The popularity of media, obtained through the internet and other advanced communication devices, plays an integral role in *Bumped*: not only do retailers in the story use media exposure to their advantage in order to market goods to an important demographic, it also serves as a means by which the general population learns about and promotes teen pregnancy. Many of the messages sent over the airways are initiated by the government to perpetuate its teen sex and pregnancy agenda. This media blitz is the result of an unholy alliance between intrusive government policies and corporate America run amok. As a result of the casting of teen

pregnancy as an act of patriotism undertaken for the benefit of the group, strangers on the street can see themselves as adjunct care-givers of sorts, subconsciously (or maybe consciously) scrutinizing any pregnant teen with whom they come into contact. Their bodies become public property, as teenage girls are expected to surrender their physical autonomy to a public effort to increase a falling birth rate; an act of sacrifice superficially lauded as a choice but practically rendered an ineluctable duty.

This public inspection of expectant mothers, aided in many respects by multiple information streams including the internet, has a present day counterpart in relation to pregnant females of any age. This phenomenon is referenced in a paper written in 2011 entitled "The next generation of pregnant women: more freedom in the public sphere or just an illusion?" for the *Journal of Gender Studies* by Kristin Heffernan, Paula Nicolson and Rebekah Fox:

> The increased biomedical expertise and information now accessible via many forms of communication systems (Internet, TV, newspapers and magazines) has become common knowledge where once it was seen as 'expert' knowledge, and as such has exacerbated medical surveillance. […] Such guidance may come from experts, but is also frequently dispensed by non-specialists and laypersons. As the pregnant woman's body becomes more noticeably pregnant with her expanding bump, she becomes more susceptible to public surveillance. (Heffernan, et al 322)

More females than ever before are present in the workforce; as a result, the opportunities for interaction between a pregnant female and the public also increase. Along these lines, one of the respondents in the same study describes her experience with strangers, while she was pregnant, in a way that eerily hints at the "all fertile women belong to the state" ideology presented in *The Handmaid's Tale*:

> I felt very resentful during both pregnancies of the way that you almost become public property and people feel it is okay to come up to you asking questions about when the baby is due and then proceed to stroke my belly: it felt a though my body was no longer mine but was a vessel for a baby! (Heffernan et al 328)

Another respondent in the study discusses how her coworkers assumed the role of "pregnancy police" during her pregnancy, and a retailer refused her service because she was visibly pregnant, further demonstrating that the public's interference with a pregnant female, if it occurs in the name of the perceived safety of the baby, is considered acceptable:

> We used to call them pregnancy police. There were quite a few girls pregnant at work at the same time as me, and it's unbelievable how much people think they have the right to interfere. One of my colleagues refused to eat lunch with me because I was having a tuna sandwich, and he said it was harmful to the baby. Then, once I went into Boots to buy some hair dye and the woman behind the counter said, 'Is it for you?', and she wouldn't sell it to me because I was pregnant. Another colleague went into the hairdressers and the same thing happened to her because the hairdresser said the other customers would complain. (Heffernan et al 328)

A disturbing aspect of these documented behaviors is that they occur in the midst of present day civilization. Perhaps the societies created by Atwood and McCafferty are *not*, in fact, that extreme after all. The inundation of information available on a daily basis can be a valuable resource for educating the populace; however, sometimes a price is paid in the form of an over-sensitized public environment in which the accepted perceptions supersede the privacy of its citizens.

A 2011 paper written for the Health Sociology Review by Alphia Possamai-Inesedy entitled *Confining risk: Choice and responsibility in childbirth in a risk society*, chronicles a study dedicated to understanding the choices pregnant women (and those who wish to become pregnant) make in response to living within a society that is increasingly hyperaware and hypersensitive to risk: "The choice of undertaking preconception care is becoming more and more popular. Not only have various media reports expounded on the benefits of preconception care, or rather the dangers or not undertaking it, but they have also highlighted the responsibility of doing so." One of the women from the study explains: "I guess all of the things you hear around you, things in the news and in the newspaper and then you are told you are in a higher risk section because of your age, it just gets to you even if you don't normally think like that" (Possamai-Inesedy 410-411). McCafferty uses this idea of society's ownership of a pregnant female's fetus, then adds the element of "the whole world is watching" (and scrutinizing) how expectant mothers care for themselves in general, and the result takes this disturbing trend one step further by televising Melody's "bumping" scene. Not only does the audience have control over the care of the unborn child through media outlets, but the child's conception also becomes part of the public domain.

The role of the media in changing the beliefs of the public may arguably be more pronounced in 2011 than it was in 1986; however, the effect of propaganda on those who are exposed to it is evident in both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Bumped*. The political rhetoric may appear to be more subdued in *Bumped*; however, combined with the free market society in which babies are so highly prized, the outcome is just as impactful as the authoritarianism of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*. Furthermore, the way in which McCafferty presents the manipulation of young women in *Bumped* speaks to the specific concerns of its readership. Young women today

are constrained to study *The Handmaid's Tale* in a classroom, which has led, as the recent work of Arwa Hasan has demonstrated, to their rejection of it as lacking "realism" or relevance to their lives. Yet, as the bestseller status of the *Bumped* trilogy indicates, they remain aware on some level that the issues Atwood raises are far from resolution.

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